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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002134

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM CAMPAIGN BEGINS WITH
MEGA-MARCHES

REF: CARACAS 002124 AND PREVIOUS

CARACAS 00002134 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DANIEL LAWTON,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez held a peaceful November 4 mass rally to mobilize support for his proposed constitutional reform package. Chavez accused reform opponents of trying to destabilize his government and urged government officials to be more "firm" with university demonstrators. Some (but not all) opposition parties held a smaller, but noteworthy, November 3 rally in opposition to Chavez' constitutional changes. Opposition leaders at that rally called for a "civic resistance" campaign to force Chavez to cancel the December 2 constitutional referendum. University students continue to stage protests around Venezuela. Two persons were killed November 2 at the University of Zulia when armed Chavez supporters reportedly fired on university students from a passing car. While the major rallies for and against constitutional reform were peaceful, the potential for political violence appears to be growing. End Summary.

Chavez Calls for "A Firm Hand"

¶2. (SBU) An ebullient and combative President Chavez spoke November 4 to a mass rally of red-shirted government supporters in Caracas to generate support for his proposed sweeping constitutional reforms. Chavez supporters descended on the capital from all over Venezuela, many arriving in government buses. Most of the supporters wore recently-printed "Si, Con Chavez" ("Yes, With Chavez") T-shirts and marched for hours from a park in eastern Caracas through the opposition borough of Chacao to downtown Caracas, tying up traffic in much of the city. The march was peaceful and festive. A number of government employees participating in the march told PolCouns that they were told to attend or risk losing their jobs. Some participants spray painted pro-reform slogans and hammers-and-sickles on buildings in Chacao.

¶3. (SBU) During his two-hour speech to the mass rally, President Chavez called the December 2 constitutional referendum the most important in his tenure. He stressed that his supporters needed to turn out the vote, and he requested that the "battalions" of his new United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) play a leading role in mobilizing

"yes" voters. He also accused the Catholic clergy, opposition parties, and university students of organizing a "counter-revolution" at the behest of "American imperialism."

Chavez specifically questioned whether university students should be given demonstration permits in the wake of the November 1 confrontations between security personnel and a small group of students. He urged Interior Minister Pedro Carreno and Caracas' mayors to use a "firm hand" against violent demonstrations. Further pro-reform rallies are expected, but not yet announced.

Opposition Groups Call for "Civic Resistance"

¶4. (SBU) A coalition of some, but not all, opposition parties held a smaller, but similarly peaceful November 3 rally in Caracas against Chavez' proposed constitutional changes. Leaders from Accion Democratica (AD), the National Resistance Command, the Red Flag party, and Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP) urged the tens of thousands of participants to engage in a street campaign of "civic resistance" in the coming weeks to try to persuade the BRV to suspend the December 2 constitutional referendum. Opposition parties Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT), Primero Justicia (PJ), COPEI, and Causa R did not participate in the November 3 rally. UNT Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez told poloff November 3 that the opposition parties that advocate voting "no" did not want to be confused with the "negative" message of the parties advocating abstention.

¶5. (SBU) The stage backdrop for the opposition rally carried a portrait of Venezuela's independence hero Simon Bolivar and Bolivar's warning that "There is nothing more dangerous than to allow the same citizen to remain in power a long time." March organizers told PolAssistant that they did not experience any significant problems from Chavistas in

CARACAS 00002134 002.2 OF 002

organizing their rally. They noted, however, that police detained and charged the driver of one of the speakers, constitutional attorney and opposition activist Hermann Escarra, with alleged illegal possession of a gun. University students are planning to march on the Supreme Court on November 7. Reform opponents are also reportedly planning large opposition marches on November 10 and 26.

Zulia Student Demonstration - 2 Killed

¶6. (SBU) Two persons were killed and 15 persons injured during November 2 student demonstrations at the University of Zulia in Maracaibo according to the local media. Alleged Chavez supporters reportedly drove by and fired on student demonstrators, killing a 21-year-old female journalism student. One of the attackers was also reportedly killed. The University of Zulia was supposed to hold student elections on November 8, but those elections have been postponed until 2008 due to the shooting deaths. On November 2 and 5, university students blocked major highways in Caracas. National Guard personnel disbursed them with tear gas. University students also launched demonstrations November 5 in Aragua and Tachira states.

Comment

¶7. (C) Both sides of the constitutional reform debate legitimately claimed a measure of success. President Chavez demonstrated that he can mobilize far more people than the opposition, although he also continues to exploit state resources and rely heavily on government employees to do so. The opposition groups that organized the November 3 rally generated more support than most observers expected and was

their biggest opposition event since the government took RCTV off the public airwaves at the end of May.

¶ 8. (C) The two weekend rallies underscore several key questions for the weeks ahead. First, is pro-Chavez support for the reforms genuine and can the BRV depend on its base to turn out. Second, will the disparate elements of the political opposition come to agreement to participate in the December 2 referendum. And, if they do, is there enough time for the opposition to mobilize nationally.

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